

## **Louis Braille: A Light in the Dark**

Nearly 190 years after his birth, Louis Braille is hailed among the great men in French history. His development of the raised-dot reading system that bears his name has enriched the lives of generations of people who are blind. Even after putting literature at the fingertips of those who were blind, he lived and died relatively unknown.

Louis Braille was born on January 4, 1809, in Coupvray, France, the second son of a harness-maker. Biographies suggest that his father hoped Louis would grow up to become a professor. As a child, Louis sat for hours in his father's shop, watching with great interest as his dad cut leather for a new saddle or wove tassels and fringes for a glossy harness.

One day when he was 3 years old, Louis decided to make his own harness from a piece of discarded leather. He needed something for cutting so he took an awl he was forbidden to use.

During a struggle to cut the leather the pointed tool slipped and injured his left eye.

The injury caused infection in that eye, then the other, resulting in total blindness, and a seemingly bleak future for the boy.

In Europe at that time there were few, if any, services for blind people. They often were treated as if they were mentally ill or retarded; many lived on charity or as beggars.

Louis adapted to village life without sight, but blindness made him an outsider until he met a new village priest, Abbae Palluy, who took a liking to the boy and gave him a sense of destiny and purpose.

Louis was 10 when the priest told the Brailles about the Institute for Blind Youth in Paris, where children learned to make their own clothes, play musical instruments and read.

Louis was excited by the thought of reading as he entered the Institute in 1819. As uninviting as the Institute's school life was, the building old, the hallways dark, food meager and water scarce, Louis' enthusiasm was not dampened.

The Institute's method of reading was known as embossing. Large letters with raised outlines were printed so the outlines could be traced with fingers. But the size of the letters made the embossed books so large and expensive that only a few were available. Louis, inspired by the dedication of the Institute's founder, Valentin Haüy, and hungry for a more practical way to read, began searching for a new reading method in 1821.

That same year a retired military man, Captain Charles Barbier, introduced the Institute to an alphabetical code of dots and dashes he had devised for sending and receiving messages at night. The combinations were punched into paper and meant to be read with the fingers. Although the Institute dropped the code after only a few months, Louis kept experimenting with it. Eventually, he focused on just the dots. He would stay up nights at the Institute and spend vacations punching dots into scraps of paper, searching for answers.

Finally, in 1824, his tireless effort paid off. Louis devised what has become the modern system

of braille. Its basis was the unit known as the braille cell, with spaces for up to six dots, two across and three down, in each cell. By using different numbers of dots in different arrangements in each cell, Louis formed 63 dot combinations to represent letters, numerals and musical and scientific symbols. It was a practical code, too, since the dots took up roughly the same space as print.

At age 15 Louis had revolutionized touch reading, opening the door to the possibility that all the world's literature someday could be read by blind people.

Not everyone endorsed the system. One headmaster at the Institute burned all books in braille. The introduction of braille did not mean the end of embossing as the official method of touch reading. The French government, with embossing contracts to protect, snubbed it at first. Students embraced it, however, and the system gained in popularity. Louis was still struggling for its acceptance when he died of tuberculosis in 1852 at age 43.

Braille ultimately gained acceptance as the method of reading by touch, and Louis finally received the acclaim for opening up the world of literature to people who are blind. To honor his contribution, he was reburied in 1952 in the Pantheon in Paris, resting place of the national heroes of France.

For more information on Louis Braille, the following books are suggested:

Davidson, Margaret. *Louis Braille: The Boy Who Invented Books for the Blind*. New York: Hastings House, 1972.

For young readers.

Kugelmass, Alvin J. *Louis Braille: Windows for the Blind*. New York: Julian Messner, 1951. First complete biography of the man who invented the braille language and opened the doors of learning to people throughout the world who are blind. For young readers.

Neimark, Anne E. *Touch of Light: The Story of Louis Braille*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970.